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Colby, Bush and the CIA

We agree that President Ford's firing of CIA director William Colby was ill-considered. The president tacitly admitted as much last week when, as an afterthought, he asked Colby to stay on through the end of the congressional investigations into intelligence activities. Given Colby's long career in intelligence and the praise he's won from congressional investigators inclined to be skeptical, keeping him in his post for the time being is sensible. That would be true, it seems to us, of any individual Ford chose from outside the CIA to be its director.

The president's choice of George Bush to replace Colby has been widely criticized on grounds that Bush's political ambitions conflict with the apolitical, independent qualities needed in a CIA director. Sen. Frank Church, chairman of the Senate intelligence committee and a prospective candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination, has said he is considering leading an effort to prevent Bush's confirmation. But the criticisms, though valid to a degree, in our view lack the strength to warrant rejecting the president's choice.

When Bush in late 1970 was named ambassador to the United Nations, critics complained of his lack of experience in diplomacy and his lack of interest, during two terms as a congressman from Texas, in foreign affairs. But contrary to expectations, Bush served well — with "intelligence, enthusiasm and humor," according to one account — during a difficult two years that included the acrimonious debate about China's U.N. membership. His job since last fall as head of the U.S. mission in Peking is

further evidence that Bush can function well in a sensitive executive assignment.

Primary causes of current doubts are Bush's partisan political involvement in recent years and the likelihood that he will be high on the list of Republican vice-presidential choices. Between his U.N. and China service he was, for nearly two years, GOP national chairman. When that job ended with his appointment to Peking, a White House official said, "George Bush was a strong and viable candidate to be Ford's vice president until the last minute."

With Rockefeller's bowing out, no wonder there's speculation that Bush might now be the leading candidate. If the speculation proves correct, Ford will have appointed a lame-duck CIA director who takes over the agency at a critical time in its existence, but has only a few months on the job before starting to campaign on the Republican ticket. That would be bad for the CIA and bad for the country.

Even though one could undoubtedly think of others who might be a better choice, Bush has nothing in his record to suggest that he would be incapable of handling the CIA directorship; the Senate would be hard-put to disqualify him as incompetent. The central issue is whether Ford intends the CIA assignment to be long enough for Bush to carry out changes that surely will be required as a result of current investigations. Not the Senate, but Ford, must resolve that question. He ought to do so without delay.